

Reprint from  
SURGERY, GYNECOLOGY AND OBSTETRICS  
February, 1930, pages 506-509

# MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

ROBERT F. WEIR

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FOR a surgeon, the year 1838 was a good time to be born. Within the years of Dr. Weir's lifetime, surgery made most astonishing and important advancement, and during this period Dr. Weir witnessed the surgery of three American wars, and he himself achieved much. To live to be ninety years old is of itself some achievement. It is fortunate for the historian that the subject of this sketch left some private personal reminiscences of his early life which, through the kindness of his only child and daughter, Mrs. La Montagne of New York City, we are permitted to record:

I had graduated, the youngest in my class, from the just established New York Academy (later the College of the City of New York) and had started as a clerk with my father, who was an apothecary in Grand Street. Dr. H. B. Sands, who later achieved great eminence, was also the son of an apothecary. During the two or three years I was acting as a clerk, I rose from taking down and putting up the store shutters to become quite expert in the manufacture of tinctures, etc., and acquired, thanks to a pleasing and diligent perusal of Wood and Bach's *Dispensatory*, quite a fair knowledge of medicines and their actions on the human body. Perhaps this training inclined me to the practice of medicine, but I have always been convinced that two incidents determined my career. The first was the experience I obtained from the painful ingrowing toe nail of my big toe. It plagued me so badly for several months until my father sent me one Saturday to the office of Dr. James R. Wood, whom I had frequently seen in our store and who was generally known by all the neighborhood as "little Dr. Jimmy Wood." His office was at the corner of East Broadway and Market Street (and they were fashionable streets then). There he held once a week a sort of clinic for his numerous students. Thither I went in due time, and was ushered into his sanctum. He examined my stripped toe and while explaining to the embryo medicos the nature of the trouble, slyly took up a pair of pincers, and quickly placing one jaw of this under my nail, clamped the upper jaw to and pulled the nail out. I gave a jump and a wild yell, but it didn't hurt so much as I thought it would, since the nail had been considerably loosened by the prolonged inflammation and suppuration. I went home relieved, and, telling my father of it, I said: "I'd like to be able to do like that." (This impression was augmented when a few months later, his father sustained a Pott's fracture and was treated by the same Dr. Wood.) The next day I announced my firm determination to become a surgeon.

How interesting it would be if other great surgeons had left biographical notes of the early mainsprings of their careers!

Dr. Weir entered the office of Dr. Gurdon Buck (of Buck's extension fame) as pupil and assistant and became a student at the College of Physicians and Sur-

geons. "Dr. Buck was a large man with a face somewhat German in aspect, slow in action and in speech, but having a thoughtful mind and fertile in surgical expedients." Dr. Weir remained with Dr. Buck three years. He tells a story of how one day, in giving ether for him, he diligently palpated the right eyeball of the patient (the method then in vogue to tell if the patient was under the anæsthetic), only to find after embarrassing cries and struggles of the patient, that he was the possessor of a glass eye! Later Dr. Weir acted as Dr. Buck's first assistant when he put on his first Buck's extension at the New York Hospital.

Dr. Weir tells of an amusing incident at the graduating exercises of his college. The seats of the auditorium had recently received a heavy coat of varnish—too recently to become thoroughly dry. When the audience started to arise at the conclusion of the exercises, they found that they were almost glued to their seats. Dr. John C. Dalton who gave the address remarked that the students followed his words with fixed attention. Dr. Weir offered as his graduating thesis, "*Hernia Cerebri*," for which he received a prize of fifty dollars.

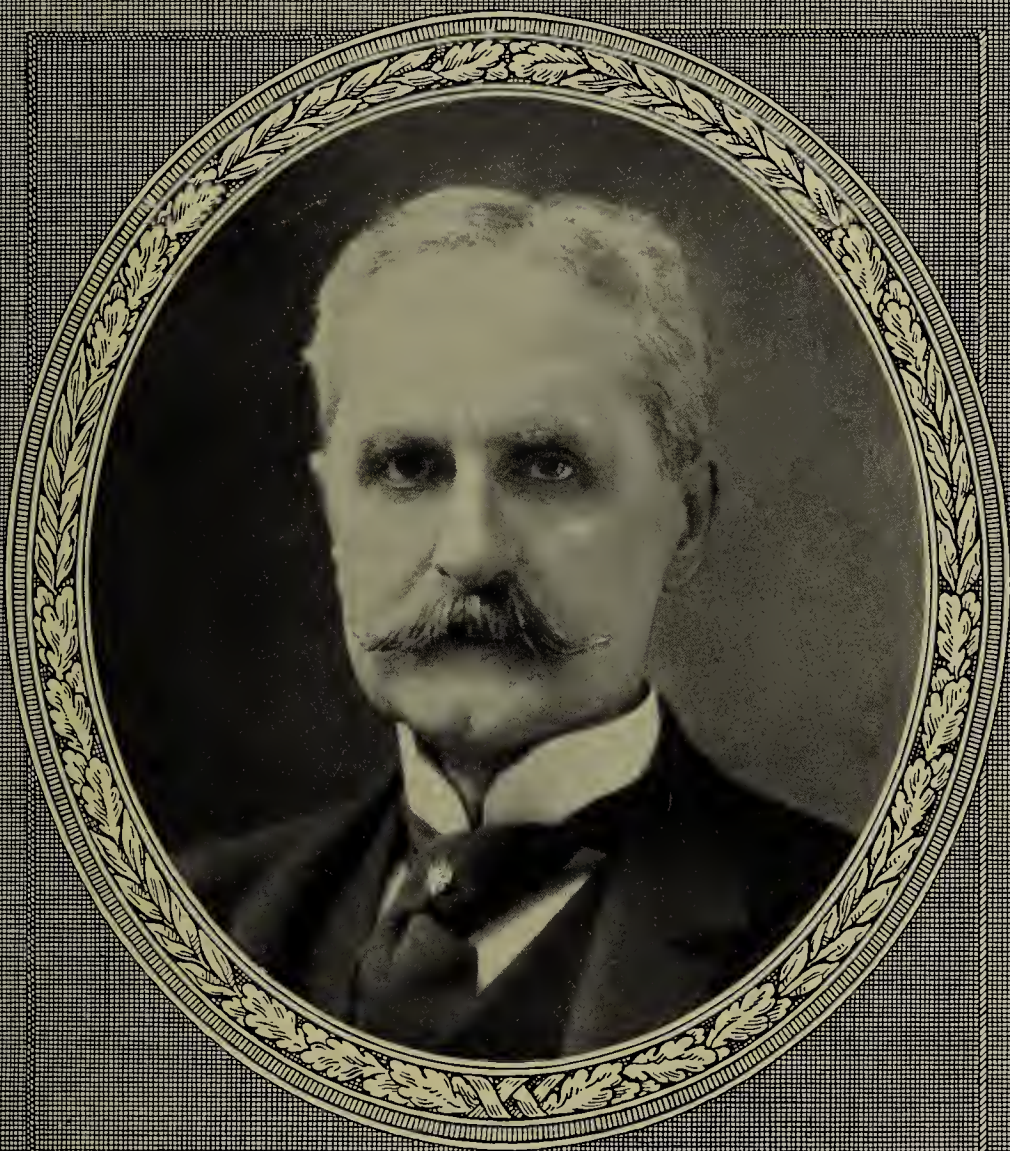
In 1856 Dr. Weir became an interne, or "junior walker" as it was then termed, at the New York Hospital which was started by Dr. Bard away back in 1769.

It is interesting to read Dr. Weir's account of the method of procedure at the New York Hospital for what were considered major operations at the time when he was house surgeon (about 1858):

The senior walker was expected to lay out the instruments: they had been resting on a velvet-lined shelf or were bedded in velvet-lined slats in an adjoining closet. He would make inquiries of the nurse, who was at other times a ward nurse, about the sponges, which, having been washed out from a previous operation, had been kept in a wooden pail of fresh water. Fine, beautiful and soft looked they when taken from the pail out of the water and placed in a basin for the nurse or one of the walkers to hand to the surgeon during the operation. Sometimes the surgeons washed their hands previously—sometimes not. Fingers laden with germs in large quantities on them or under the nails were stuck into the wounds we made and we further introduced (alas, all this was unconsciously done) infectious and often fatal germs by the brilliant and apparently clean instruments we employed. After we had done all this we tied blood vessels with strings with long ends, so that we might pull them out when they loosened themselves from the tied arteries. Furthermore, we dressed our wounds with wax cerates kept in jars open to germ-laden dust and smeared over lint with foul spatulas."

In 1861, Dr. Weir, desiring to enter the regular U. S. Army Corps, went up for the required examination. Concerning this, here are Dr. Weir's own words: "During the examination I thought my chance of passing was gone when the chairman of the board asked me in sharp tones to give the treatment for pneumonia. But, he said, 'you have not mentioned blood-letting. Wouldn't you employ it?' 'No,' I replied, 'I wouldn't.' 'But, Dr. Weir, if I had pneumonia, wouldn't you bleed me?' 'No,' I firmly replied, 'that day has gone by.' 'Then I wouldn't like to have you for my doctor,' retorted he. But his bark was worse than his bite, for I passed."





ROBERT F. WEIR  
1838-1927





On the way to Frederick, Maryland, Dr. Weir was received by Lincoln at the White House, and was again presented to him when Lincoln came to Frederick.

The hospital at Frederick of which Dr. Weir was chief was in proximity to the battlefields of the Shenandoah, South Mountain, Antietam, and Gettysburg. He saw it rise to a capacity of 3,000 patients and his assistants increased in number to 25 exclusive of the "medical cadets." From 1862 to 1865 Dr. Weir had charge of the "United States of America General Hospital" at Frederick, Maryland, one of the Government's largest hospitals, and for his services was publicly thanked in the general orders of the Surgeon General's office. It is interesting to read in a recent personal communication from Dr. W. W. Keen:

At the battle of Antietam I was in charge of the Ascension General Hospital in Washington. I was ordered to Frederick, Maryland, in the neighborhood of Antietam and was Weir's first assistant in the administration of the hospital there, more especially in the supervision of all the capital operations. Either he or I had to approve of them before they were done because many of those who had patriotically volunteered were without a fundamental knowledge of surgery.

Weir was a capital operator, careful, judicious and resourceful. I have hardly known a better one. He also ingeniously suggested that in certain cases where the appendix had to be removed, the stump should be sewed first in the abdominal wall, leaving the aperture of the stump in the abdominal wall. By this means we would be able to wash out the whole of the great bowel at any time and to any extent, and when the necessity ceased, the small opening of the appendix in the abdominal wall was closed. He was indeed a Master Surgeon."

In the *Transactions of the American Surgical Association* for the year 1927 appeared an obituary notice written by Dr. C. L. Gibson of New York City:

Dr. Weir was president of the American Surgical Association 1900-1903. He had not been active a number of years before his death and had survived a brilliant group of surgeons who have left their impress on American surgery—notably Sands, Markoe, Thomas Ball, McBurney, McCosh, Hartley and Gerster. His Civil War record was marked by extraordinary achievement. He was always an indefatigable worker in research and was always in the front rank of progress: a distinguished leader, and many of the brilliant members of the American Surgical Association owe much of their development to his personal example and interest.

His greatest activity was in an epoch when pioneer work was being done along many lines of surgery, and he had his share of success. He was one of the early workers in brain surgery. He made a great many contributions to surgical literature.

Dr. Weir was a handsome man, of striking personality, and his fine character invited much affection and loyalty, especially of his younger associates. He was also a great traveler and his reminiscences and experiences are most interesting and valuable.

Dr. M. Allen Starr, who was intimately associated with Dr. Weir for so many years in college work, addressed the New York Academy in 1927 as follows:

As Professor of Surgery in the College of Physicians and Surgeons from 1873 to 1903, he taught many of the men of this country now distinguished, who came from all parts to attend his clinics and to watch his operations, and he imbued them with enthusiasm for their profession, as well as sound knowledge of its principles. His wide experience gained chiefly in the Civil War in which he served as surgeon in charge of the hospital

at Frederick, Maryland; his ample knowledge of surgery gained by familiarity with home and foreign literature; his skill in the varied lines of operative work; all combined to place him in the front rank of the surgeons of his time. And his genial nature, delightful personal manner, wide interest in art and letters and life outside his profession added to the esteem and affection with which he was held by his friends. He visited Europe many times and also went to Japan and China. . .

As attending surgeon in the New York Hospital from 1876 to 1903, he was an indefatigable worker without regard for financial return, for at that period the hospital was given over to charity patients and *private wards were not opened* (italics mine). This industry is evident by the very long list of his publications in the medical press during these years, more than a hundred being mentioned in the *History of the College of Physicians and Surgeons* published in 1900. During this period the introduction of Lister's methods of antiseptic, and later aseptic, surgery was the subject of the greatest interest, and Professor Weir was among the first to adopt, urge, and teach modern methods which eventually revolutionized surgical procedure. While his chief work was in abdominal surgery, he was the first in this country to operate for a brain tumor, under the direction of Sequin, and the success of that operation led him to make many contributions to the surgery of the head and brain. There is hardly any field of surgery in which his published articles do not increase knowledge. And his diagnostic wisdom and good judgment combined with his skill in operative procedure added to his reputation and in many lines made him the chief authority of his time.

He was elected president of the American Surgical Association in 1900, member of the International Surgical Association, president of the New York Surgical Society, of the Practitioners' Society, of the New York Academy of Medicine, and of the Greater New York Medical Society. In 1895 he was made a corresponding member of the Société de Chirurgie de Paris, and in 1905 an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. Of this latter appointment it is interesting to note that Dr. Weir, Dr. Keen, and the Prince of Wales received this honor at the same time. It was the first occasion that an honorary degree had been bestowed by that body.

During his extensive practice in New York City, he had associated with him as partners Dr. Robert Abbe, Dr. Gibson and Dr. Ellsworth Eliot, all whom became eminent. Dr. Eliot, in a personal communication, writes: "Dr. Weir never developed a hobby although he tried hard on the tennis court and whist table. By his internes he was affectionately called 'Bobbie' and of this he was aware."

A few months after the organization of the American College of Surgeons in Washington, D. C., Monday evening, May 5, 1913, Dr. Weir at the first convocation, held in Chicago, November 13, 1913, was made an Honorary Fellow. The only other surgeons so honored were Sir Rickman J. Godlee, London; William Stewart Halsted, Baltimore; William Williams Keen, Philadelphia, and John Collins Warren, Boston.

Many honors were bestowed upon Dr. Weir, he had appointments on the staffs of many hospitals, and belonged to the principal medical societies of his time.